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ABSTRACT

Problems in the teaching of James Joyce to undergraduates are explored in a discussion of the "Dubliners", "A Portrait of the Artist", "Ulysses", and "Finnegans Wake". Several multimedia approaches, including the use of records and film-making, are suggested for overcoming other problems encountered due to time factors, presentation of background material, and student attitudes. Selected references are mentioned. (RL)

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The Joyce of Teaching:

Some Notes on Presenting James Joyce to Undergraduates

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The temptation to predict the future of a literary reputation is a strong one, but most of us are strong enough to resist. My concern in the course of these few remarks on the teaching of Joyce is not his artistic mortality--and I presume the fact of his current popularity. The undergraduate reads Joyce and the graduate student reads about him; whether the former will lose interest or whether the latter's industry will in itself lead to his post-mortem remains to be seen. The point here is that Joyce, in the classroom and in the scholarly journal, is a very current fact of academic life. Granted this, we might examine some of the difficulties in teaching him and at the same time consider some (possibly) new techniques.

The teacher who assigns Joyce can presume nothing. When students hear Joyce's name there are few blank faces; most of them know that once upon a time (and a very bad time it was) Ulysses was banned. Although this means little to them--especially these days--they are aware that during the Dark Ages the book was considered pornographic. It is also quite possible that somewhere along the way they read one or two stories from Dubliners and depending on how these selections were presented, some impression of Joyce's work was received. The student therefore comes to class with a vague notion of the reputation and perhaps an introduction of sorts to the work. However, any possible bias (either positive

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or negative) as a result of this is not nearly as important as the virtually universal problem of the historical and biographical background of Joyce's works. Many instructors, after emphasizing the importance of this material, proceed to reduce it to a series of comments introduced into the lectures and discussions. The villain here is time, but the fact remains that these attempts to fill in the background to the works are self-defeating. The best intentions will not give the students this necessary framework. If the student has the background before he begins reading A Portrait of the Artist, for example, and if he can call upon this information while he is reading it, the advantages are obvious. On the other hand, if he cannot grasp the various references and if the instructor has to point them out in passing (as he must, if only for reasons of time) then everyone loses. Even worse is the situation where the teacher presumes that his students know certain basic facts--Catholic ritual and the position of the Church in Victorian Ireland, for example--only to discover as the assignment ends that his listeners do not know them, and have been too timid to admit it. This does happen, and not infrequently.

We cannot expect the students--I am thinking especially of sophomores, and even juniors--to read Richard Ellmann's Boswellian James Joyce, but we can assign a few key sections of it as part of the required reading. A copy of the biography placed on the reserve shelf, coupled with the announcement that certain chapters must be consulted before the text itself is read, would avoid a great deal of frustration in many cases. Of course, the instructor has no guarantee that the students will do the reading (when can he presume this?) but at least he has made the material available, and he is

within his rights to expect them to be aware of it. The Ellmann biography need not be confined to the reserve shelf; since it is now available in paperback, it would certainly not be asking too much to have the students purchase it. In addition, Don Gifford's Notes on Joyce (also in paperback) is an invaluable aid in explaining the obscure allusions in Dubliners and A Portrait. In fact, the use of this book alone would eliminate most of the practical problems in understanding Joyce's world.

The classic Joyce texts for undergraduates are Dubliners and A Portrait. Ulysses is reserved for the more advanced, and of course no one reads Finnegans Wake. No sane instructor would ever present Ulysses or Finnegans Wake to his sophomores or juniors, but a sampling of Joyce's later style could prove stimulating for a class that has shown a decided interest in Dubliners or A Portrait. An episode from Ulysses (the "Sirens" for example) or a few paragraphs from Finnegans Wake would provide a good opportunity to examine Joyce's experiments with words. Today, with the increasing emphasis on multi-media approaches in teaching, this could be carried even further: the students could hear as well as read the selected texts. The "Anna Livia Plurabelle" section of Finnegans Wake is especially suited to this approach. The students could be provided with copies of the passage (xerox or mimeo). After it has been read--preferably aloud--and after a general discussion of the meaning, the instructor could then play Joyce's own recording of the concluding section. This would provide a good opportunity for the students to gain a greater understanding of the possibilities of words while they progress from the printed page to the spoken word itself. If they are made sufficiently aware of what is being attempted, Joyce's

own reading should prove a genuine revelation. This technique could also be applied to Ulysses--a recording of Molly Bloom's soliloquy, or parts of any of the epidodes, heard in conjunction with a reading of the text, would make Joyce's work even more alive for the modern undergraduate.

One of the few areas of Joyce research that remains relatively untouched is the cinematic technique to be found in the works. From the point of view of teaching students, Joyce's use of film technique has a special value, since many of today's undergraduates are not only moviegoers, but in some cases moviemakers; there are many student film societies and cinema departments on many campuses. A student who is involved in films could bring his knowledge to an examination of Joyce's use of the cinema. The possibilities for good work in this area are very great; some interesting papers could be written using this technical point of view: Dublin bay dissolving into a sickroom basin as Stephen leans over the parapet of the tower at the beginning of Ulysses; the sudden fadeout when Stephen smashes the chandelier in the "Circe" episode; the almost purely cinematic technique to be found in the opening scenes of A Portrait, etc. An outgrowth of this last example might be to have an ambitious student write a scenario for the filming of A Portrait--a very challenging project.[1] Or, a student might write a criticism of the film version of Ulysses, with his own suggestions as to how it should have been filmed. The possibilities in this area are virtually limitless.

[1] At this writing, the director John Huston is preparing a script for A Portrait, which will be filmed in Ireland.

There are, of course, classes where none of these ideas would work; perhaps there are others where the instructor would be tempted to try more than one. In more than one sense, Joyce is very much here and now, and it could prove educational for all of us if we approached him using tools that seem to be less and less outside our trade.

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Goldberg, S.L. James Joyce. New York, 1962.
One of the Evergreen Pilot Books, and one of the best brief surveys of Joyce's work.

Joyce, James. The Portable James Joyce, ed. Harry Levin. New York, 1966.
Contains the complete text of Dubliners, the definitive text of A Portrait, in addition to the collected poems and selected passages from Ulysses and Finnegans Wake (including the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" section).

Discography

James Joyce Spricht. 12" 33 1/3 rpm LP, Rheinl Verlages, Zurich, Switzerland. LP No. 33-487. The latest issue of the only recordings by Joyce: the "Moses in Egypt" speech from the "Aeolus" episode in Ulysses (recorded in London in 1924) and the concluding section of "Anna Livia Plurabelle" from Finnegans Wake (recorded in London in 1932).

The James Joyce Society. 12" 33 1/3 rpm LP, Folkways Records, New York. LP No. 9593-4. Selections from Joyce's works.